

Present to the Presence

Living with Awareness of God in Whom We Trust

Psalm 16: 5-11; Romans 8: 31, 35-39

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I am really not being morbid but, of late, when I am trying to determine what to speak about when fulfilling an assignment such as this, I think about what some professors are invited to do: to deliver a lecture they would deliver if they had but one last opportunity. What would one want to say if he or she knew all their learning, all their wisdom and insight, knowledge and passion were to be packed into their final lecture?

That is really a great challenge: if this were your last time to address a group of students, what would you say to them? The concept was inspired by the "Last Lecture" delivered at Carnegie Mellon University by Dr. Randy Pausch on September 18, 2007. He had terminal pancreatic cancer – a fact known at the time that he spoke. His lecture was entitled "Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams." He died on July 25, 2008.

So what would I want to say if I had one last time to bring to expression my deepest truth? I've entitled my presentation "Present to the Presence: Living With the Awareness of God in Whom We Trust." As part of the process of coming to that decision I traveled back over my faith journey, trying to identify those critical moments that have shaped me and brought me to where I find myself at this advanced stage of my journey. And there is no question but I must point to the loving nurture of my childhood, the nurture received from deeply committed Christian parents. There was implanted in me an unquestioned trust in the good and gracious God of Christian faith. Growing up, there was never a question, never a doubt. At my ordination I received a letter from my father telling me when I was in my mother's womb he dedicated me to God's service should I turn out to be a boy. (Women's ordination wasn't even in the picture at that time.) Of course, that was not a surprise to me for he would often speak of his prayer that I would go into the ministry. Yet I did not know of the moment when he first brought it to expression on his knees.

In a sense I never chose my vocation; it seemed as natural as breathing that I would pursue that course. I never questioned nor resisted. Thus, graduating from

seminary in 1960, I assumed my first pastorate at the First Reformed Church of Spring Lake, Michigan. I came to that wonderful congregation with my childhood faith and piety. Having gone through twenty years of education including the four at college and three at seminary, my childhood faith remained intact; I really had not been educated but remained with the faith and piety I imbibed with my mother's milk. I began my ministry with an unexamined faith understanding, believing not only that it was true but that it was absolute truth. I was not only very conservative in my Reformed and evangelical faith, I was militantly so.

In retrospect I realize that that militancy was the consequence of a deep insecurity. I was defensive but without being really aware of it. A statement put out by the Theological Commission of the Reformed Church on the authority of Scripture stated the Bible was "infallible in what it intended to teach." I considered that statement was intended to allow that Scripture might be in error in things that were not what it "intended to teach" regarding our salvation. I objected; I insisted that the Bible was inerrant and infallible, period!

That is not really important except to indicate where I was as I began my ministry – very conservative and threatened by any challenge to my fervently held orthodox Reformed faith.

That is the setting for detailing the long journey that brings me to where I am at present – very comfortable giving expression to my faith understanding in this fine interfaith community.

I suspect the long unwinding of that exclusive, absolutist faith was triggered by what may seem a rather trivial occurrence. One of my young people made her Christian confession of faith. The next summer she went away to work with a friend whose mother was a Mormon. She returned to tell me she was going to become a Mormon. I was heartbroken. I gave her Scripture texts. She came back with texts from the Book of Mormon. It was then that I realized if all I had was a text against another text, I was deadlocked. (I shudder to think of my ignorance.)

About this time the Reformed Church came out with a new curriculum in conjunction with the Presbyterian Church – The Covenant Life Curriculum. The curriculum was introduced with Foundation Papers. I began to study them, especially regarding the view of Scripture. For the first time I began to open up to a larger view. I taught the opening adult course at Spring Lake and then moved to a congregation in New Jersey that was very conservative. When I brought in that curriculum there, there was resistance. The resistance made me dig deeper. I began to see the closed orthodoxy, from which I stemmed, from the other side. After a brief three-year pastorate there it was time to go back to school. I left for post-graduate study in the Netherlands.

Without going into the details, I made an appointment with Professor Hendrikus Berkhof at the University of Leiden. His study was in his home and I met him there. A most inviting and cordial person. I was impressed though not yet committed to Leiden. But as I arose to leave I noticed a mimeographed paper pinned to the drape that separated his study from the rest of his house. I went to read what was written; what was written changed my life. The lines were those of Alfred Lord Tennyson:

*Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be;
They are but broken lights of Thee,
And Thou, O Lord, art more than they.*

I remember the moment vividly. I had found my professor!

For those who have been with me for some time, this is a familiar account but I must, in this retrospective, underline it here because I was at a critical point in my life and ministry. My “little system” had hit a wall. My whole “system” was based on the absolute authority of the Bible as the God-breathed, inerrant, infallible truth. I was devoid of any sense of how the critical studies of Scripture had revealed it as a very human product that was a witness to revelation – that is, the report of an experience of unveiling, not the unveiling itself.

As mentioned above, my first hint of a critical view of Scripture came in the Foundation Papers of the Covenant Life Curriculum. The first assignment from my new mentor, Professor Berkhof, also my professor of Dogmatics, was to read Karl Barth. I went to my set of Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I, Part 2 – *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, and 45 years later I could turn to the page heavily underlined that struck me as I first encountered it:

If we take Luther and Calvin together, we can say that the way to that universal and moving view of inspiration which answers to the majesty of God, and as we find it in Scripture itself, was again opened up by the Reformation. The Reformers’ doctrine of inspiration is an honouring of God, and of the free grace of God. The statement that the Bible is the Word of God is on this view no limitation, but an unfolding of the perception of the sovereignty in which the Word of God condescended to become flesh for us in Jesus Christ, and a human word in the witness of the prophets and apostles as witnesses to His incarnation. On their lips and understanding this is the true statement concerning the Bible which is always indispensable to the Church.

But the post-Reformation period first of all failed really to take the newly opened road to the meaning and understanding of the statement. And then it obviously took a different and mistaken way: mistaken, because it destroyed the mystery of this statement, because it necessarily resulted in

a denial of the sovereignty of the Word of God and therefore of the Word of God itself. In this connection we cannot pay too much attention to a remarkable parallelism: the development of the original Reformed Protestantism into the newer Protestantism which began in the so-called orthodoxy and became visible about 1700 was admittedly characterised by a gradual growth of uncertainty in the knowledge of the sin and justification of man and the judgment and grace of God.

This uncertainty, as it concerned the question of revelation, was followed first by a quiet, then by an increasingly open and direct inflow of natural theology. To this development there corresponded, curiously enough, a stiffening in the understanding of the inspiration of the Bible which also began quietly but then developed no less definitely. The strictly supranaturalistic character of the statements which were the outcome of this stiffening tends to create an optical illusion. We first think that we are faced by a contradiction when we see orthodoxy becoming laxer and laxer in relation to natural theology and in secret to the doctrine of grace, but stricter and stricter in relation to the doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible. In reality the two belong intimately together.

The gradually extending new understanding of biblical inspiration was simply one way and, in view of its highly supranaturalistic character, perhaps the most important way in which the great process of secularisation on which post-Reformation protestantism entered was carried through. This new understanding of biblical inspiration meant simply that the statement that the Bible is the Word of God was now transformed (following the doubtful tendencies we have already met in the Early Church) from a statement about the free grace of God into a statement about the nature of the Bible as exposed to human inquiry brought under human control.

The Bible as the Word of God surreptitiously became a part of natural knowledge of God, i.e., of that knowledge of God which man can have without the free grace of God, by his own power, and with direct insight and assurance. That the highly supranaturalistic form in which this step was made was only a form used because no better was available is proved by the haste with which it was abandoned almost as soon as it was adopted.

It was followed by the enlightenment and the ensuing “historical” investigation and treatment of the Bible, i.e., the character of the Bible as the Word of God was now transformed into that of a highly relevant historical record. And this merely revealed what high orthodoxy had really sought and attained under this apparently supranaturalistic form: the understanding and use of the Bible as an instrument separated from the free grace of God and put into the hands of man. If it should be our aim

today to go back to the better understanding of the Bible which we find in the Reformers and above all in the Bible itself, then it is not a question of renewing the doctrine of inspiration of high orthodoxy in opposition to the Enlightenment and the development which followed it. Rather, we must carefully and consistently avoid the mistake of that orthodoxy – which is all the more dangerous because its supranaturalistic trend can make it appear advantageous. It is only at this root that the evil which broke out later can really be tackled. (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I.1,p. 522f)

Barth's essential insight was that revelation must be a present experience as the Holy Spirit takes what once was revealed and recorded in Scripture so that it becomes, by God's grace, a present revelation by the same Holy Spirit that inspired prophets and apostles. God's revelation is not to be contained between the covers of a book that one can slip in one's pocket, as it were, carrying around the Word of God. Revelation happened; revelation happens; but it is always a contemporary event by the grace of God's Spirit.

I was fascinated by Barth's historical analysis that revealed how, as reason's dominance evolved as the Enlightenment emerged, exalting human rationality, challenging the Bible as the supernaturally inspired Word of God, the orthodox Protestant church increasingly affirmed the Bible as inerrant and infallible. As reason rose in ascendancy, Barth claimed, rather than trusting the Bible as the product of God's revelation which, by the grace of God, would become ever anew revelation by the same grace of God, the post Reformation Scholastics now set up the Bible as itself the depository of revelation, utilizing the same human reason that Enlightenment thinkers were using to discredit the Bible.

I found that movement fascinating and very enlightening. I understood Barth saying the whole approach to "saving" the Bible from its Enlightenment critics by means of counter-reasoned argument was doomed to failure. Now the Bible was in human hands; rather than seeing it as a record of revelations past that may by God's grace be again a place of revelation, orthodoxy attempted to prove the Bible itself was the revelation – a futile endeavor.

I became a convinced Barthian at that point, no longer afraid that turning over the next stone might bring to light some data that would undercut biblical authority. The authority did not reside in "the book" which was a fallible human witness to revelatory experience of the respective writers. With that a huge burden was lifted from my shoulders. Now I had room to think, to question, to wonder. With the wise and gracious guidance of my mentor, Hendrikus Berkhof, I plunged into my study with a voracious hunger. I would read and read, one volume leading to five more and from time to time would call my Professor for an appointment to discuss my progress. Eventually, after a couple years, he would say, "Mr. Rhem, now you must begin to write." But the next volume lead me to investigate more footnotes and delve further into the bibliography. I was so "hungry" and I could not stop pushing out the frontiers of my evolving grasp of

the historical development of Christian dogma from the Apostolic Age through the early church fathers and the creedal formation that continues to mark Christian dogma.

Since Dogmatics was not considered a science in the Netherlands' university system, Professor Berkhof, though my advisor, could not be the professor of the major study of my program, he being a "Church Professor," appointed by the Netherlands Reformed Church. He advised a second minor in New Testament, and The History of Dogma as my major. What wise counsel; the history of the development of Christian Dogmatics was precisely what I needed – what I loved. I traced the historical development from the early centuries through the Reformation. It was an exciting time of discovery. After three years I took my *testamens* – oral exams with each of my three professors in Dogmatics, New Testament and History of Dogma. Having passed those three exams I was ready for the oral exam before the whole faculty for the *Doctorandus* Degree, which I was granted in April, 1969.

Next – deciding on a subject for my doctoral dissertation and the writing of it. I decided to write on the place of history in the theology of Karl Barth and Wolfhart Pannenberg, a young German theologian who was of a school of scholars who were the students of the twentieth-century giants, Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, both of whom in their respective fields had no place for "revelation in history." For Bultmann, the only "footprint" of revelation in history was the "*dass*," the "that" of Jesus – he was an historical person but we can recover no reliable data of his life except that he "was." For Barth, revelation came "vertically from above;" it was always an event. The only footprint of God's revelation in history was the thirty-three years of Jesus' historical existence bracketed by two miracles – the Virgin Birth at the beginning and the Resurrection at the end.

The next generation was not satisfied with that conception of revelation that disallowed historical enquiry into the life of Jesus as well as the Old and New Testament history. That debate was the focus of my research and I became intensely interested in the development of historical thinking which emerged in the nineteenth century. But I soon learned that the real watershed that divided theological development from the Apostolic Age to the present was the Enlightenment. My sense was one had to go through the Enlightenment if the ancient faith was to be adhered to in the present.

After having chapter one of my dissertation approved, I returned home but I had none. I had spent the last six months alone in the Netherlands, my former wife having left in the summer of 1970. A broken marriage finally came apart and I returned in December of 1970 to see my children, thinking I would return to the Netherlands to finish the dissertation and receive the Doctor of Theology degree which I saw as necessary because I thought my pastoral ministry was finished since divorce was certain and, at that time, I had no hope of receiving a call from a congregation. But I was wrong.

My first congregation, in what I still can only understand as an act of very great grace, invited me to return to be their pastor, knowing that divorce would follow shortly. Returning to Leiden, I packed my books and few belongings and on March 1, 1971, began again to be the pastor of the First Reformed Church of Spring Lake.

Again, graciously, I was encouraged to continue to work on my dissertation. But the congregation began to grow and I was fully engaged. I did keep in touch with Professor Berkhof, letting him know what was happening. One day I received a letter from him in which he wrote,

Mr. Rhem, I no longer expect you to return to complete your doctoral work. Theology is for the service of the church. God has called you to a more important work.

Such a professor! Such grace! Such sensitivity! It is no wonder in subsequent years we, with our spouses, traveled together and twice they were our house guests. But that is another story. The above transitions me to Spring Lake where, three months after beginning again, we re-named ourselves Christ Community Church.

Though now a full-time pastor, I could not cease being fascinated by the theological history through which I had traversed. In my preaching I sought to interlace my best understanding of the biblical text but in the present context of our history. Adult Education, however, provided opportunity to share my growing understanding of the Christian faith.

In 1974 the Catholic theologian Hans Küng published a book in German entitled *Christ Sein*, which was translated into English in 1976 under the title *On Being a Christian*. I found it a marvelous statement of Christian faith in light of all I had learned about the historical development that brought us to the present and I used it with groups of lay folk. In 1978 Küng published *Existiert Gott?*, an English translation appearing the same year under the title *Does God Exist?* That book too I consumed and used in an adult education class. For me, it was as though my whole European study was condensed in one 800-plus page volume.

It was here that I faced the Enlightenment head-on as it related to the Christian faith. Küng drew together for me in concise form the crisis of modern atheism that arose in the wake of the Enlightenment. In a section entitled “The Challenge of Atheism,” Küng’s sub-sections are:

- I. God – a projection of man? Ludwig Feuerbach
- II. God – a consolation serving vested interests? Karl Marx
- III. God – an infantile illusion? Sigmund Freud.

The next major division Küng entitles “Nihilism – Consequence of Atheism,” dealing with Friedrich Nietzsche.

In scholarly fashion with great clarity he sets forth the kernel of the thought of these thinkers. He then offers a critique acknowledging where the thrust of their thought raised valid issues Christian theology must deal with.

Küng opens this section, “The Challenge of Atheism,” by setting the stage for his development which follows:

Socrates was condemned to death as *atheos*, as “godless.” But he had by no means rejected any kind of God; he had rejected, like many other educated Greeks, only the customary veneration of the gods of the Greek *polis*. Atheism properly so-called does not deny merely a plurality of gods or merely a particular way of worshiping God or even simply a personal, “theistic” God. It denies any God and any divine reality, whether understood mythologically, theologically or philosophically. In both antiquity and the Middle Ages, there were very few who upheld atheism in this sense: a total view of reality assuming that it is possible to do without any God at all.

It was only with the radicalized French Enlightenment – in the aftermath of secularization and the Church’s compromising of belief in God by its struggle against both modern science and modern democracy – that atheism, as we saw, became more widespread at first among the educated classes. The new defenders of atheism in the nineteenth century felt, however, that they were far above this “common atheism.” In fact, it was only with Feuerbach and Marx and later – supported by atheistic natural scientists – with Nietzsche and Freud that atheism became a *Weltanschauung*, threatening belief in God and Christianity at their roots, penetrating all classes of the population and finally reaching global dimensions beyond the frontiers of Europe. (p. 189)

The font of this modern (nineteenth century) atheism Küng finds in Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872). Of course, Hegelian philosophy had set the stage but in Feuerbach modern atheism found its architect. Küng contends that,

With Feuerbach, the tremendous danger to belief in God and Christianity presented by Hegel’s identification of finite and infinite consciousness, of man and God, becomes apparent. (p. 199)

What happens to God? Küng explains:

And God? What follows, from all this, for the notion of God? The essential presupposition is that “the consciousness of the infinite is nothing else than the consciousness of the *infinity of the consciousness*.” That is: “In

the consciousness of the infinite, the conscious subject has for his *object the infinity of his own nature*.” This, then, is how the notion of God emerges, and it seems entirely understandable. Man sets up his human nature out of himself, he sees it as something existing outside himself and separated from himself; he projects it, then, as an autonomous figure – so to speak – in heaven, calls it God and worships it. In a word, the notion of God is nothing but a *projection of man*: “The *absolute* to man is *his own nature*.”

The knowledge of God, then, is a gigantic floodlight. God appears as a projected, hypostatized reflection of man, behind which nothing exists in reality. The divine is the universally human projected into the hereafter. What are the attributes of the divine nature: love, wisdom, justice...? In reality, these are the attributes of man, of the human species. *Homo homini Deus est*, man is God for man: here lies the whole mystery of religion.

This becomes particularly clear with the personal (“theistic”) God of Christianity, independent and existing outside man. This God is nothing other than the specific notion of man, given independent existence, the personified nature of man. Man “contemplates his nature as external to himself”; God is the manifest interior of man, his expressed, “relinquished self.” The Attributes of God are really the attributes of the objectified nature of man. It is not, as in the Bible, that God created man in his own image. But, on the contrary, man created God in his own image. God as a ghostly Opposite, existing outside man, stimulated by man himself. Man a great projector, God the great projection. Just test it...and it disappears.

God is intellectual being, spirit. In this very way, God appears as a pure *projection of human understanding...*” (p. 200f)

From Feuerbach’s God as Projection idea one can see how that was used by Karl Marx claiming God, thus projected, serves the vested interests of the powerful. From Feuerbach, Freud claimed God to be an infantile illusion. Küng explains Freud’s claim regarding the source of religion.

What is the source of religion?

First of all we must look at the *historical background*. For Freud, the question of the origin of the various religions was quite obviously *psychological* in character. For Christian and Jewish *theologians*, for centuries it had been a dogmatic question: the pagan religions were distortions, degenerations of the original, pure, revealed religion (with a primordial revelation), as a result of man’s sin as described in the Bible. But, for the rationalist “enlighteners” of the eighteenth century also – David Hume in England, Rousseau, Voltaire and Diderot in France,

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in Germany – it was a dogmatic question: the various religions were distortions and degenerations of the originally pure religion of reason, with its clear belief in God, freedom and immortality – distortions brought about by priestly inventions and popular customs. It was only with the rise of a *science of religion*, in the nineteenth century that the question of the origin of religion became a historical, philological, ethnological, psychological question. Even in classical Greece, of course, there had been an interest in the history of religions; but a science of religion as a specific field of study has existed only from the nineteenth century onward. In this field, primitive religion itself became a problem. (p. 175f)

Freud's answer to the question of the source of religion? Küng summarizes thus:

Religion, then, arose out of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. *Religion is wishful thinking, illusion*. "Illusion" means that religion is not a deliberate lie in the moral sense or – and Freud stresses this – error in the epistemological sense; nor is it necessarily illusory in the sense of being unrealistic or contradicting reality. Illusion – and this is typical – is motivated by the need of wish fulfillment: it is a product therefore of sensual-instinctual life and needs for its deciphering the decoding technique of applied psychology. (p. 284)

And where did the projection idea of Feuerbach and the various ways projection was utilized by Marx and Freud lead? Küng leads us to the conclusion found in the brilliant Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) – that is to Nihilism. In his parable of the "madman" his atheism comes to expression. There a keen-sighted prophet "who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours" proclaimed the death of God. "Whither is God," cried the 'madman'... "I will tell you. We have killed him – you and I. All of us are his murderers."

Küng gives us Nietzsche's understanding of the nihilism which he embraced. Küng writes that Nietzsche used the term nihilism initially with little discrimination, but in his unpublished work he reflected on all aspects of it.

"What does nihilism mean?" asks Nietzsche here, and his answer now runs: "*That the highest values devalue themselves*. The aim is lacking: 'why?' finds no answer." In another fragment, he expresses it more precisely: "*Radical nihilism* is the conviction of an absolute untenability of existence when it comes to the highest values one recognizes; plus the realization that we lack the least right to posit a beyond or an in-itself of things that might be 'divine' or morality incarnate." It can be said – and this, too, will be explained in the following pages – that, according to Nietzsche, *nihilism means the conviction of the nullity, of the internal contradiction, futility and worthlessness of reality*.

Nietzsche sees this nihilism as coming in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: "What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: *the advent of nihilism*. This history can be related even now; for necessity itself is at work here. This future speaks even now in a hundred signs, this destiny announces itself everywhere; for the music of the future all ears are cocked even now. For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect." Indeed, it must be said: "Nihilism stands at the door," and we can only ask: "Whence comes this uncanniest of all guests?"

Thus Küng charts the nadir of modern atheism. But he does not leave us there. Rather he begins to build his case for a "yes" to reality beginning with an alternative to the emptiness of nihilism – fundamental trust. From there he affirms a "yes to God – alternative to atheism." Then "yes to the Christian God" – finally, "The God of Jesus Christ."

Küng builds carefully, taking into account all that has been considered in the claims of modern atheism but offering an alternative based in trust.

In my own continuing wrestle with the issues raised in the post-Enlightenment modern atheism, I struggled to find a reasonable faith. In my study of the new quest for the historical Jesus I found John Knox particularly helpful in his *The Humanity and Divinity of Christ*. Writing about the humanity of Christ he makes a statement that defined my own quest for understanding Jesus.

There are two conditions under which a significant symbol loses (or, perhaps better, is shown to have lost) its vitality and power. One of these is when our hearts no longer need it, when all we want to say or need to say (or to have said to us) can be said without it. The other is when our minds, failing to discern in it the coherency of truth, are forced to reject it. *For our hearts cannot finally find true what our minds find false*. If they could, we should be hopelessly divided and any firm grasp of reality would be impossible. What we mean by 'the heart' in this connection is not something alien or counter to the mind, but is the mind itself quickened and extended. The wisdom the heart has found, if it be wisdom and not fantasy, is the same wisdom the mind all the while has been feeling after, if haply it might find it. It is a wisdom which, far from bypassing the understanding, enters through the doors of it, fills and stretches the space of it, and only then breaks through and soars above it. (p. 107)

That was for me a critically important insight. Yet I was aware that my faith from childhood, which through all the intellectual struggles of my quest for an

understanding, was deeper and more expansive than my mind, my rational faculties, could explain or justify before the bar of reason.

Only recently was I given a copy of a chapter from the book *Walking the Tightrope of Faith*. The chapter's author is Hendrik Hart, a philosopher/theologian who has done much work in post-modern thought. Without doing justice to the careful development of his contention in this chapter, let me simply offer a few lines from Professor Hart:

Trust in a spiritually powerful orientation to the existential issues in the face of the boundary conditions of existence is historically not a matter of concepts, propositions, and arguments, but of stories, rituals, prayers, and hymns. (p. 198)

Hart is in dialogue with Kai Nielsen as he writes that for which I have been seeking.

Closely connected to Nielsen's insistence that faith-as-trust is logically dependent on propositional belief is his pervasive complaint about religion's lack of rational coherence (37, 39, 41, 43, 111). One problem with this complaint is that it does not do justice to those Christians who try to nourish faith as a non-intellectual(istic) life-guiding trust, as a form of spirituality. In faith thus developed, rational coherence is not necessarily a relevant concern, the way it is in forms of theology developed to counter the Enlightenment by modelling theology on rational philosophy (38-39). I think Nielsen misses the point when he continually charges that in order to be properly religious these Christians must conform to notions of religion especially developed in Enlightenment-influenced theology. (p. 199)

"Enlightenment-influenced theology" – that was the story of my long journey. Finally I come to realize what Hendrik Hart claims defines my ongoing quest while living with fundamental trust. This is the understanding I have been seeking.

We all need to trust some orientation to the ultimate questions of life. But "answers" to these questions point in a direction that transcends rational comprehension. These "answers," that is, point to mysteries, told in myths. If we trust traditions which "tell" what people have experienced when they trusted the life-direction to which the "answers" in the myths point, these traditions provide guidance, especially if we decide to trust the narratives enough to live by them. It is not necessary here to insist on traditional language. If the faithful of some religion are to be in communication again with contemporary naturalists or atheists on equal footing, we can at least temporarily suspend talk about God, or even about some "transcendent revealed," and for the time being talk only about trust making visible

something that comes from beyond the boundaries of our understanding and is related to the boundary issues of existence. To derive hope from a resurrection narrative is not the same thing as insisting on the filmable factuality of a resuscitated corpse walking out of a grave. If our hope depends on the scientific modernization of an ancient faith-language, then hope undermines the nurture of trust.

It is possible to “claim” the “truth” of such a resurrection narrative. But that is done, not in the logical space of reasons, or by delivering technologically enhanced evidence, but by actually living the life of hope the narrative inspires, by practically making manifest in action that such a life reveals truth or lights up our path. (p. 216)

Finally, after that lengthy excursus I am ready to deliver “My Last Lecture.” There are many places within Scripture to which I might turn but let me select just two – a Psalm and a paragraph from Paul’s Letter to the Romans.

Psalm 16 is one of my favorites. Beginning with verse 5, the Psalmist expresses a sense of deep wellbeing.

The boundary lines have fallen to me in pleasant places;
I have a goodly heritage.

He is full of gratitude for his human situation – referring to Israel’s coming into the land of Israel when the tribes divided the land by casting lots. The Psalmist is pleased with his human situation. But his wellbeing is rooted in something deeper.

I keep the Lord always before me;
because he is at my right hand
I shall not be moved.

In the Hebrew “before me” is literally “before my face.” That being so he is steadfast whatever human experience brings him.

His heart is glad;
His soul rejoices.

So confident is he that he cannot conceive of being given up to *Sheol* – the realm of the dead. One commentator writes,

It can be read as the general prayer of the faithful who, without any doctrine of resurrection or eternal life to explain just how, nonetheless trust the Lord to keep them with such total confidence that they cannot imagine a future apart from life in God’s presence. (James L. Mays, *Interpretation: Psalms*, p. 88)

Again the Psalmist exclaims,

You show me the path of life.
In Your presence there is fullness of joy;
in Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Were we to read this poem in the original Hebrew we would see a beautiful juxtaposition. In verse 8, as noted above, “before me” is literally “before my face.” In verse 11, “in Your presence” is literally “before Your face.”

God before my face;
I before God’s face.

Further, God at my right hand keeps me secure. At God’s right hand are pleasures forevermore.

The Psalmist lived with a vivid sense of God’s presence. That awareness kept him steady in all the vicissitudes of life. That sense of trust was so strong even the fear of death, of loss, was transcended. He lived with fullness of joy. He was present to the presence of God.

We find the same confidence in St. Paul in the wake of his vision of the crucified Christ who was resurrected – living beyond death’s boundary.

If God be for us, who can be against us?
Who will separate us from the love of Christ?

Then he lists a series of negative human experiences – No, he affirms, in all life’s trials we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

Listing again all possible threats to us he finally declares nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Present to the Presence, living in total trust, the Apostle knew a peace which he says in another context is beyond all human understanding.

With those two eloquent expressions of trust bringing confidence, joy and deep assurance that

All will be well;
all will be well;
all manner of things will be well.

Thus I would keynote my last lecture. I feel deeply blessed to have had the exceptionally rich experience of plumbing the depths of the human record of the quest for God, for the deep probing of our human condition at life’s boundary

situations. I have followed rational inquiry to the depths of nihilism and known there was something more. And at the end of my serious quest, what rational inquiry could not deliver, I find in trusting where I cannot know, and “know” all is well.

Was the long journey of intellectual quest worth it if, in reality, I end where I first began? Indeed, for I’ve seen it for the first time! Oliver Wendell Holmes said it well:

I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.